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ABSTRACT

The history of the advancement of blacks in the United States is almost a laboratory study of human achievement. But the story of how millions of people developed from the depths of slavery--acquired work skills, personal discipline, human ideals, and the whole complex of knowledge and values required for achievement in a modern society--is a largely untold story. One small but important part of this advancement has been educational achievement. There are a number of successful black schools in various cities that exemplify this educational excellence. For the purposes of this study, six high schools and two elementary schools were selected. Some of the schools were once outstanding but are no longer, while others are currently academically successful. The research of the schools extended beyond such intangibles as atmosphere and school/community relations, as these could be either observed or reconstructed from documents and from interviews. The schools studied were: Booker T. Washington High School (Atlanta), St. Paul of the Cross (Atlanta), Frederick Douglass High School (Baltimore), McDonough 35 High School (New Orleans), St. Augustine High School (New Orleans), Xavier Prep (New Orleans), P.S. 91 (Brooklyn), and Dunbar High School (Washington, DC). (BZ)

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Thomas Sowell

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Patterns of black excellence

THOMAS SOWELL

THE history of the advancement of black Americans is almost a laboratory study of human achievement, for it extends back to slavery and was accomplished in the face of the strongest opposition confronting any American racial or ethnic group. Yet this mass advancement is little discussed and seldom researched, except for lionizing some individuals or compiling a record of *political* milestones. But the story of how millions of people developed from the depths of slavery—acquired work skills, personal discipline, human ideals, and the whole complex of knowledge and values required for achievement in a modern society—is a largely untold story. A glance at the mass of human misery around the world shows that such development is by no means an automatic process. Yet how it was accomplished remains a matter of little concern—in contrast to the unflagging interest in social pathology.

One small, but important, part of the advancement of black Americans has been educational achievement. Here, as in other areas, the pathology is well known and extensively documented, while the healthy or outstanding functioning is almost totally unknown and unstudied. Yet educational excellence has been achieved by black Americans.¹ Current speculative discussions of the “pre-

¹ Thomas Sowell, “Black Excellence: The Case of Dunbar High School,” *The Public Interest*, No. 35 (Spring 1974), pp. 1-21.

requisites" for the quality education of black children proceed as if educational excellence were only a remote possibility, to be reached by futuristic experimental methods—indeed, as if black children were a special breed who could be "reached" only on special wave lengths. When quality education for black youngsters is seen, instead, as something that has *already* been achieved—that happened decades ago—then an attempt to understand the ingredients of such education can be made on the basis of that experience, rather than as a search for exotic revelations. The problem is to assess the nature of black excellence, its sources, and its wider implications for contemporary education and for social policy in general.

There are a number of successful black schools in various cities that exemplify this educational excellence—for the purposes of this study, six high schools and two elementary schools were selected. The high schools were chosen from a list, compiled by the late Horace Mann Bond, which shows those black high schools whose alumni included the most doctorates during the period from 1957 through 1962. The two elementary schools were added because of their outstanding performance by other indices. Some of the schools were once outstanding but are no longer, while others are currently academically successful. The schools were researched not only in terms of such "hard" data as test scores but also in terms of such intangibles as atmosphere and school/community relations, as these could be either observed or reconstructed from documents and from interviews with alumni, former teachers, and others. On the basis of this research, several questions were raised:

1. Is black "success" largely an individual phenomenon—simply "cream rising to the top"—or are the successes produced in such isolated concentrations as to suggest powerful forces at work in special social or institutional settings? Strong and clear patterns would indicate that there are things that can be done through social policy to create or enhance the prospect of individual development.

2. Does the environment for successful black education have to be a special "black" environment—either culturally, or in terms of the race of the principals and teachers, or in terms of the particular teaching methods used? Are such conventional indices as test scores more or less relevant to black students? For example, do these top black schools have average I.Q. scores higher than the average (around 85) for black youngsters in the country as a whole? Are their I.Q. scores as high as white schools of comparable performance by other criteria?

3. How much of the academic success of these schools can be explained as a product of the "middle-class" origins of its students? Have most of the children taught in these schools been the sons and daughters of doctors and lawyers, or have they represented a cross section of the black community?

4. How important was the surrounding community as an influence on the quality of education in these schools? Did this influence come through involvement in school decision-making or through moral support in other ways?

5. How many of the assumed "prerequisites" of quality education actually existed in these outstanding schools? Did they have good facilities, an adequate budget, innovative programs, internal harmony, etc.?

6. What kind of individual was shaped by these institutions? More bluntly, was the black excellence of the past an accommodationist or "Uncle Tom" success molded by meek or cautious educators, or the product of bold individuals with high personal and racial pride?

Although these questions will be treated in the course of this article, the first question is perhaps the easiest to answer immediately. Black successes—whether measured by academic degrees or by career achievement—have not occurred randomly among the millions of black people scattered across the United States, as might be expected if individual natural ability were the major factor. On the contrary, a very few institutions in a few urban centers with a special history have produced a disproportionate share of black pioneers and high achievers. In Horace Mann Bond's study, five per cent of the high schools produced 21 per cent of the later Ph.D.'s.² Four of the six high schools studied here—McDonough 35 High School, in New Orleans; Frederick Douglass High School, in Baltimore; Dunbar High School, in Washington, D.C.; and Booker T. Washington High School, in Atlanta—produced a long list of black breakthroughs, including the first black state superintendent of schools (Wilson Riles, from McDonough 35), the first black Supreme Court Justice (Thurgood Marshall, from Frederick Douglass), the first black general (Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., from Dunbar), the first black Cabinet member (Robert C. Weaver, from Dunbar), the discoverer of blood plasma (Charles R. Drew, from Dunbar), a Nobel Prize winner (Martin Luther King, Jr., from

² Horace Mann Bond, "The Negro Scholar and Professional in America," *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 562.

Booker T. Washington), and the only black Senator in this century (Edward W. Brooke, from Dunbar). From the same four schools, this list can be extended down to many regional and local "firsts," as well as such national "firsts" as the first black federal judge (William H. Hastie, from Dunbar), the first black professor at a major university (Allison Davis, from Dunbar, at the University of Chicago), and others. All of this from just four schools suggests some systematic social process at work, rather than anything as geographically random as outstanding individual ability—though these particular individuals had to be personally outstanding, besides being the products of special conditions.

The locations of these four schools are suggestive: Washington, D.C., Baltimore, New Orleans, and Atlanta. Baltimore, New Orleans, and Washington were the three largest communities of "free persons of color" in the Southern or border states in 1850.³ None of these schools goes back to 1850, and some of them are relatively new; but the communities in which they developed had long traditions among the old families, and historical head starts apparently have enduring consequences. New Orleans had the most prosperous and culturally advanced community of "free persons of color" and the largest number of high schools on H. M. Bond's list—all three of which are still outstanding high schools today.

Atlanta: Booker T. Washington High School

When Booker T. Washington High School was founded in 1924, it was the first public high school for Negroes in Atlanta and in the state of Georgia, and one of the first in the nation. However, the black community of Atlanta had had both primary and secondary education for its children long before that. In 1869, the American Missionary Society—which greatly influenced quality education for Southern blacks—established in Atlanta several "colleges" and "universities," whose initial enrollments were actually concentrated in elementary and secondary study, with only a few real college students.⁴ The first principal of Booker T. Washington High School was, in fact, a man who had been in charge of the high school program at Morris Brown College.

Professor Charles Lincoln Harper was principal of Booker T.

³ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York, Macmillan, 1971), p. 74.

⁴ Henry Reid Hunter, *The Development of the Public Secondary Schools of Atlanta, Georgia: 1845-1937* (Office of the School System Historian, Atlanta Public Schools, 1974), pp. 49-52.

Washington for its first 19 years, and a major influence on the shaping of the institution. By all accounts, he was a man of great courage, ability, and capacity for hard work. Far from being middle-class in origin, he came from a black farm family living on a white-owned plantation. As a child, he attended the only available school, which was 10 miles away and which held classes only three months of the year. Somehow Harper managed to educate himself and go on to college, and later to graduate work at the University of Chicago and Columbia. In addition to becoming a principal, Harper was a civil rights activist at a time when economic retaliation, lynchings, and Ku Klux Klan violence were an ever-present threat. The times were such that many blacks gave money to the NAACP *anonymously* through Harper, who bore the onus of converting it into checks to mail to the NAACP headquarters in New York. Thurgood Marshall said that Harper "stood out head and shoulders above many others because of his complete lack of fear of physical or economic repercussions."⁵

As principal, it was common for Harper to work Saturdays, and to spend part of his summer vacation taking promising students to various colleges and universities, trying to gain admission or scholarships for them. A contemporary described him as a man of "utter sincerity" who "lives on the job." Though he was a man who drove himself, with teachers he was "affable" and "easy to approach," and he showed "vast stores of patience" with students. A man of modest means—he owned only one suit—he nevertheless gave small sums of money to poor children in his school when they needed it. Yet for all his dedication to black people, he was not uncritical of black institutions. As late as 1950, he said, "There is not a single first-class, accredited college in the state for the education of Negro students."⁶ To say that must have required considerable courage in Atlanta, home of Morehouse, Spelman, and Morris Brown colleges, and of many proud alumni.

The cohesion of the Atlanta black community and the political sophistication of its leaders were directly responsible for the building of Booker T. Washington High School. A public high school for Negroes was unprecedented in the state of Georgia, and some members of the all-white school board considered it an outrageous demand. Black voters enforced their demand by turning out in sufficient numbers—in the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan—repeatedly to

⁵ "They Knew Charles L. Harper," *The Herald* (October 1955), p. 19.

⁶ Quoted in V. W. Hodges, "Georgians Join Atlantans in Tribute to Mr. Harper," in *The Atlanta World* (June 14, 1950).

defeat school bond issues until it was agreed that the high school would be built. But the board of education did not go one step beyond its grudging agreement: The school building alone was built on bare land. Harper conducted a fund-raising campaign in the community to provide landscaping and to build a statue of the school's namesake in front of the entrance. The board of education's tightfistedness continued to be a problem for the school for decades. Classes were large in the early years: 45 to 50 pupils per class was not unusual. The students received hand-me-down textbooks discarded after years of use in white schools.

Extra efforts by Harper, the staff, and the community overcame these obstacles. The community contributed money for the building of an athletic stadium and helped support school athletics out of their own pockets. The board of education provided no money at all for athletic uniforms, or for athletes to travel. However, the coach obtained uniforms from a local sports store and drove the teams in his own car, with gas supplied free by a gas station in the community. The team ate hot dogs donated by a black drugstore. On their own time, teachers drove students to cultural events during the spring vacation. The teachers of this era also maintained closets full of second-hand clothing and shoes for needy pupils—all brought to school in paper bags, so that no one would ever know whose old clothes he was wearing.

The atmosphere in the school during this era was a blend of support, encouragement, and rigid standards. One alumnus described it as a "happy school" with "hard taskmasters." Of one teacher it was said: "She did not tolerate sloppy work any more than a Marine sergeant tolerates a coward on a battlefield." Another teacher "threw homework at you like you were in college instead of the sixth grade." Those who did not learn on the first try in school stayed after school for as many days as it took to learn. Yet the students found the teachers inspiring rather than oppressive. A sense of individual worth and pride of achievement were constantly sought. "You couldn't go wrong," an alumnus said: "The teachers wouldn't let you."

Racial and political awareness were part of the early curriculum but traditional subjects—including Latin—dominated. Racial pride was developed by example as well as by words. Many teachers refused the indignity of riding in the back of segregated buses, which meant that some of them had to walk during years when cars were rare.

In the 50 years of its existence, Booker T. Washington has had

only five principals: C. L. Harper for 17 years (1924-1941), C. N. Cornell for 20 years (1941-1961), J. Y. Moreland for eight years (1961-1969), before being promoted to area superintendent, and A. A. Dawson for four years (1969-1973), also before being promoted to area superintendent. The present principal, Robert L. Collins, Jr., assumed the post in 1973. He is a graduate of the school, and his daughter is the third generation of his family to attend.

The school has undergone some metamorphoses in the half-century of its existence. It is no longer the only black high school in the city, and the neighborhood in which it is located is run down—both factors tending to lower academic performance—while there are such offsetting tendencies as better financial support and better physical equipment. The available records do not go back far enough to permit comparison with the performance of the early years, but the current academic performance of Booker T. Washington is far from that of an elite school. On a variety of tests, its students scored significantly below the national average, and below the average of other Atlanta high schools. The demeanor of its students also seems much more in keeping with that of a typical urban ghetto school than a school with a distinguished past. Black Atlantans seemed defensive about discussing these changes, though one characterized the school as “a little thuggish” today. It is not unusual for a school which loses its monopoly of black high school students and is located in a declining neighborhood to have difficulties maintaining standards. Other schools in this study have suffered similar fates. But the justifiable pride of Atlantans in the school's past makes it difficult to trace the process by which the present uninspiring situation came about. Certainly it is clear that the present financial resources and political clout—a black superintendent of schools and a black mayor of the city—are no substitute for the human resources that enabled earlier generations to overcome heavy handicaps.

Interestingly enough, the current principal is not as defensive as other Atlantans inside or outside the school system. While he will not openly concede a decline in academic performance, he freely acknowledges a number of factors which make it a harder job to get good performance from students of a given level of ability. Chief among these is less parental support and cooperation: Parents may be more “involved” in school decisions today, but they are less cooperative than in earlier decades. In particular, parents are less willing to take the side of the school teacher or principal

who wants an able student to take more demanding courses instead of following the path of least resistance. Even when the parents understand the long-run educational need, they are often not willing to risk immediate problems in relations with their children. Discipline problems are also more numerous and more difficult, and there are fewer methods available for dealing with them. Corporal punishment was still permissible in the mid-1940's, when Collins was a student, but it is no longer an option. Moreover, whatever discipline is imposed is less likely to have parental support or reinforcement, and more likely to provoke parental indignation. Still, Collins works at it—12 hours or more a day. It is too early to tell if he can turn the situation around, especially since the general problem extends well beyond Atlanta, is not limited to black schools, and has had a varying impact on schools across the country.

Atlanta: St. Paul of the Cross

A very different school in many ways is St. Paul of the Cross. Its openness was the first of many contrasts. Records just received from a testing organization were taken straight from the envelope and spread out on the table for inspection. This confidence was based on years of solid performance. A sample of I.Q. scores for this Catholic elementary school shows them consistently at or above the national norm of 100—which is to say, significantly above the national average of about 85 for other black children. This school came to our attention as a result of an earlier research project surveying I.Q. scores. The mean I.Q. of the St. Paul student body for the years surveyed (1960-1972) ranged from 99 to 107.

St. Paul is located in a middle-class black suburban area of Atlanta, but its students are drawn from various parts of the city. Of all the schools in this study for which we were able to obtain the data, St. Paul has the highest proportion of white-collar and professional occupations among its students' parents. For the period 1960-1972, 40 per cent of the parents were either white-collar or professional. Our breakdown shows 33 per cent white-collar and seven per cent professional, but that is based on counting school teachers in the white-collar category, and the two categories are presented together simply to avoid needless (and endless) debate over where the line should be drawn. For the other schools in this study, this internal breakdown is of little significance, since the two categories together usually add up to no more than 10 per cent. But although St. Paul has a substantial proportion of white-

collar and professional parents for a black school, it is still not predominantly middle-class, in the usual sense of having children whose parents are doctors, engineers, or professors, or are in similar occupations.

Quiet, calm, and orderliness prevail in St. Paul's modern building, even during the changing of class. Yet the students do not seem either repressed or apprehensive. There was talking during the change of classes, but no yelling or fighting. Corporal punishment is one of the disciplinary options, but it is seldom used. Discipline is usually maintained through individual discussions between the teachers—half nuns and half laity—and the children. For example, a little boy who had spilled his soda in the hall without cleaning it up was told that the cleaning woman works hard to keep the school nice, and it was suggested that he apologize to her for making her job harder—but all this was done very gently without burdening him with guilt. This calm, low-key approach is made possible by small classes (about 30), small student body (about 200), and an automatically self-selective admissions process, since hardcore troublemakers are unlikely to apply for admission to a private school.

Instruction is highly individualized. Instead of the classic picture of the teacher standing in front of the class lecturing, the more usual scene in the classroom at St. Paul was a teacher very much engaged with an individual student or a small group, while the other members of the class worked intently on their respective assignments. This individualized approach extended even to allowing students to go to the library on their own. The child's self-confidence is built up in subtle ways. However, there was no single teaching method or formula imposed from above. The usual bureaucratic paperwork was absent at St. Paul. Records were well kept and complete, but not cluttered with trivia. Administrators had time to circulate through the school and get to know the students, rather than being stuck at their desks behind piles of paper. Morale is high enough to attract lay teachers at lower salaries than they receive elsewhere.

St. Paul has had only four principals in its 21-year history. Three of these were nuns of the Sisters of St. Joseph, and the other was a black layman appointed in the 1960's at the height of the emphasis on "blackness." However, the initiative for a black lay principal came from whites in the religious order, rather than from either the black community or black parents. The current principal is a white nun.

The children are encouraged to take pride in their black heritage, but the curriculum is heavily oriented toward the basics of education—especially reading. There is also religious instruction, but the student body is about 70 per cent *non-Catholic*, though it was initially predominantly Catholic. Black non-Catholic students in Catholic schools are common in cities around the country, as black parents seek the education, the discipline, and the sheer physical safety which the public schools often cannot offer. The tuition is modest—about \$450 per year for non-Catholics and \$360 for Catholics—and the school runs a deficit, which is made up from general church funds.

Though quite different from Booker T. Washington High School in many ways, St. Paul has one problem in common with it: Some parents think that the school is *too* intellectually challenging for their children. Interestingly, this view is more common among those parents who are public school teachers.

Baltimore: Frederick Douglass High School

As of 1850, the 25,000 "free persons of color" in Baltimore were the largest number in any city in the United States, so it is not surprising that Baltimore's high school for black children was among the earliest founded, in 1892. Like many other black schools throughout the United States, Frederick Douglass High School survived for decades with inadequate financial support, was located in a succession of hand-me-down buildings that whites had discarded, and was stocked with old textbooks used for years before by white students, refinished desks from white schools, second-hand sports equipment, and so on. Douglass was for many years the only black high school in Baltimore. The school contained academic, vocational, commercial, and "general" programs. Because the surrounding communities had no high schools for Negro children, black students from outside Baltimore also came to Douglass—some legitimately, through stiff tests given to outsiders, and many others by the simple expedient of giving false addresses in Baltimore, often the addresses of relatives or friends.

Although pupils from Baltimore faced no tests for admission, there was a self-selection factor at work. Those without sufficient interest or skills would have dropped out before high school, in an era when students left school at earlier ages and when substandard students repeated grades, instead of today's automatic promotion. In short, while Frederick Douglass in its early decades was formal-

ly an all-inclusive black high school serving Baltimore and vicinity, in practice there were automatic selection factors which screened out the wholly uninterested or negative student. These were not high academic admission standards, such as elite private schools imposed, but even this wholly informal screening was sufficient to keep the school free of "discipline problems."

The teachers included men and women trained at the leading colleges and universities in the country. An alumnus of the 1930's recalls that his principal, Mason Hawkins, had a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and his teachers included individuals with degrees from Harvard, Brown, Smith, and Cornell. They were trained in content rather than educational "methods"—and their teaching styles approximated those of rigorous colleges: discussions rather than lectures, reading lists rather than day-by-day assignments, papers rather than exclusive reliance on "objective" tests. But there was no single teaching method imposed from above. The teachers often put in extra time, without pay, especially to work with promising students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Students were given pride in their achievements as individuals, but no mystique of "blackness." Negro history week was observed, and there was an elective course in black history, but it was not a prominent element in the curriculum. Although formal guidance counselling was minimal, the individual teachers actively counselled students on their own. But the teachers' concern for the students took the form of getting them to meet standards, not of bringing the standards down to their level of preparation. In reminiscing about her 40 years as teacher and administrator at Douglass High School, former principal Mrs. Edna Campbell said of her students, "Even though you are pushing for them, and dying inside for them, you have to let them know that they have to produce."

The interest of the teachers in the students was reciprocated by the interest of the parents in supporting the teachers and the school. "The school could do no wrong" in the eyes of parents, according to alumni. Parental involvement was of this supportive nature rather than an actual involvement in school decision-making. "Parent power" or "community control" were unheard-of concepts then.

Most of the whites in Baltimore were relatively unaware of Frederick Douglass High School—they did not know or care whether it was good or bad—and this indifference extended to the board of education as well. Under the dual school system in the era of

racial segregation, the lack of interest in black schools by the all-white board of education allowed wide latitude to black subordinates to run the black part of the system, so long as no problems became visible. "Benign neglect" is perhaps the most charitable characterization of this policy. In short, Douglass High School's achievements were not a result of white input, at either the administrative or the teaching levels.

Color differences within the black community were significant in the school as well. Light-skinned alumni tended to minimize this factor, but darker-skinned alumni sometimes still carry bitter memories. One man, now an official of the Baltimore school system, recalls being maneuvered out of the honor of being class valedictorian at Douglass, in favor of a lighter-skinned student from a socially prominent family.

Like several of the schools studied, Douglass' days of glory are past. A decline began with the building of other black high schools in Baltimore and became precipitous in the wake of the Supreme Court's desegregation decision in 1954. While the mean I.Q. in the academic program at Douglass ranged from 93 to 105 for the 20 years before the 1954 decision, it fell immediately below 90 in 1955 and remained in the 80's from February 1955 through February 1958. This reflected the exodus of more capable students to white high schools. A concerted effort was made to reverse this trend in the 1960's, especially from 1965 to 1973, when Mrs. Edna Campbell was the principal. Our sampling of test scores for this period indicates some success. I.Q. scores went back into the 90's from 1965 through 1971, the last year for which we have a sample of 20 or more scores.

Today, in its decline, Frederick Douglass High School has better physical facilities, some integration of the faculty, and more parental input into the decision-making process, as well as a Baltimore school system dominated by black officials. There is little evidence that this compensates for what it has lost. Indeed, some knowledgeable people in Baltimore believe that it is precisely the growth of "student rights" and "parent power" that is responsible for declining discipline in schools. There certainly was evidence of such discipline problems at Douglass. A researcher collecting data for this study had her purse snatched in the school building itself, and some weeks earlier there had been a shooting there. This was a far cry from the school that had once been second in the nation in black Ph.D.'s among its alumni, and the only black school to produce a Supreme Court justice.

New Orleans: McDonough 35 High School

New Orleans has had a unique role in the history of American race relations, and so it is not surprising that the city has had not one, but three outstanding black high schools on Horace Mann Bond's list—and all three are *still* outstanding. Long before the Civil War, the free Negro community in New Orleans had rights, privileges, and economic success well in advance of its counterpart in any other American city. By 1850, "free persons of color" owned \$15 million worth of taxable property in New Orleans—one fifth of the total taxable property in the city.

The pattern of race relations in New Orleans had been established before the city became a part of the United States as a result of the Louisiana Purchase in 1812, and it was—and largely remained—the pattern common to Latin America, rather than the pattern of Anglo-Saxon slave societies in the Western Hemisphere. For example, the "free colored" population of Latin America had a far wider range of occupations open to them than did American Negroes, and they often dominated the skilled artisan trades in Latin countries—simply because there were just not enough whites. The French, Spanish, and Portuguese who colonized the Western Hemisphere did not bring women, families, or a working class with them to the extent that the Anglo-Saxons did, and so were both economically and sexually more dependent upon the indigenous populations and those of African descent. This dependency led to a greater relaxation of racism in practice, even though the Latins subscribed in principle to the same "white supremacy" doctrines as the Anglo-Saxons.

New Orleans, as a former French (and Spanish) colony, reflected the Latin pattern in the skills of "free persons of color," few of whom were laborers, many of whom were small businessmen, some of whom were wealthy, and a few of whom were even commercial slave owners. New Orleans also reflected the multicolored caste system characteristic of Latin American countries, in contrast to the stark black/white dichotomy of Anglo-Saxon nations. The celebrated "quadroon balls" of antebellum New Orleans were but one aspect of this system.

Segments of the "free colored" population of New Orleans had been giving their children quality education (sometimes including college abroad) for more than a century before the first black public high school was founded in 1916. This school—McDonough 35 High School—was for many years the only public high school for New Orleans Negroes, but it was preceded by, and accompanied

by, private black secondary schools, including Catholic schools—again, reflecting the Latin influence. Two Catholic high schools—St. Augustine and Xavier Preparatory—and McDonough 35 make up today's three outstanding black high schools in New Orleans.

So many schools in New Orleans are named for philanthropist John McDonough that numbers are added to distinguish them. McDonough 35 High School is outstanding among these. It has had only four principals in its nearly 50-year history. The first principal, John W. Hoffman, was a well-traveled man with a cosmopolitan outlook. The second principal, Lucien V. Alexis, was a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy ('14) and Harvard ('18), and was an "iron-fisted" ex-Army officer. The third principal, Mack J. Spears, was a more diplomatic man with considerable political savvy—which proved to be decisive in saving the school from the physical or educational extinction which came upon other outstanding black high schools during the time when "integration" was regarded as an educational panacea. The current principal, Clifford J. Francis, is a quiet, thoughtful man who accepts overtime work as a normal part of his job. He runs a smoothly operating, high-quality school which, for the first time, has a good physical plant and a good racially-integrated staff.

When McDonough 35 was opened in 1917, it was housed in a building built in the 1880's. As late as 1954, this building was heated by potbellied stoves, with the students keeping the fires going by carrying coal. When a hurricane passed through New Orleans in 1965, the ancient building simply collapsed. At this point, the all-white board of education decided to disband the school and assign its pupils to other schools in New Orleans. But, unlike other outstanding black schools which were destroyed by white officials who were unaware of their quality, McDonough 35 fought back. Principal Mack Spears organized community support to save the school, lobbied Congressmen, and ultimately obtained the use of an abandoned federal court house to house the institution until a new school building could be constructed.

The institution he saved was one which was an inspiration to its students, as well as a leading producer of later black Ph.D.'s. By chance, I happened to encounter Wilson Riles, the California State Superintendent of Schools, the day after my first visit to McDonough 35, and the very mention of the school's name caused his face to light up and provoked a flood of warm memories of his student days there. He credited the school with taking him and other black youngsters from an economically and culturally

limited background, and giving them both the education and the self-confidence to advance in later life. Mack Spears, a student and later a principal at McDonough 35, told a very similar story. Spears was the son of a poor farmer, but he remembers vividly how his teachers promoted the idea of the worth of the individual—how they always called the boys “Mister” and the girls “Miss,” emotionally important titles denied even adult Negroes throughout the South at that time.

Although the school had few counsellors in its earlier days, the teachers acted as counsellors, and as instructors and role models. But with all the psychological strengthening that was an integral part of the educational process, there was no parochial “blackness” in McDonough 35. Cultural expansion was the goal. Questions about “black English” in McDonough 35 brought a “hell no!” from Spears. The current principal more gently observed that this was a recent and minor matter, of interest to only a few young white teachers.

Like some other outstanding black high schools, McDonough 35 suffered a decline in quality as other black high schools were built in the same city and as neighborhood changes left it in a less desirable part of town. At one point in the 1950's, there was a controversy over the right of its teachers to carry guns for self-protection. The academic deterioration of this period matched the deterioration in social conditions and morale. The median I.Q. of the school population in the mid-1950's was in the low 80's; but under the new policies introduced when Spears became principal in 1954, I.Q.'s began to rise, to a peak of 99 in the 1965-1966 school year; and they have remained in the mid-to-upper 90's since then. Unfortunately, there are no I.Q. data available for the earlier period of the school's academic excellence—the period during which the Ph.D.'s studied by H. M. Bond would have been high school students there. The present I.Q. scores—at about the national average, and therefore significantly above the average for black students—must be interpreted in the context of a city where private Catholic schools attract large numbers of both white and black students with higher educational aspirations and achievements. McDonough 35 median I.Q.'s have consistently been above the city-wide average for public school students—white and black—for the past decade.

The policies introduced in the mid-1950's which reversed McDonough 35's decline included keeping neighborhood derelicts out of the school, ability-grouping, or “tracking,” to deal with the

variation in student capabilities and interests, and a widening of school boundaries beyond the immediate neighborhood. Spears, a former football player, was perfect for keeping the derelicts out of the school—for even though he spoke softly, the big stick was implicit in his very presence. Instead of explaining away low test scores by “cultural deprivation” or dismissing them as “irrelevant,” Spears used those scores to demonstrate to parents and to the black community the full depth of the problem and to get support for educational change, including ability-grouping to deal with the wide range of scores and a self-selection admissions system to supersede neighborhood boundaries.

All was not harmony in McDonough 35, even in its heyday. The internal class differences within the black community—which revolved around color differences going back to the era of slavery—were more pronounced in New Orleans, just as intra-group color differences in Latin cultures generally exceeded those in Anglo-Saxon cultures. However, light-skinned Negroes were *not* noticeably overrepresented among students, faculty, or administrators. And darker Negroes, such as Riles and Spears, were nevertheless accepted by the school, even though the larger community was divided socially along internal color lines.

Whites were, at best, a negligible factor in the development of McDonough 35 High School. According to former principal Spears, the all-white board of education “did not give a damn—and we took *advantage* of that to build academic excellence.”

New Orleans: St. Augustine High School

St. Augustine High School is a school for boys founded in 1951 by the Josephite Fathers. Its first principal was a young priest, Father Matthew O'Rourke, with neither experience nor training in education. Keenly aware of these gaps in his preparation, Father O'Rourke began a crash program, taking education courses at a local university—but found them “empty” and “a big zero.” He and the other similarly inexperienced young priests and laymen on the faculty proceeded by trial and error—and dedication.

One of the first issues to arise came with the introduction of corporal punishment. In an era of growing racial sensitivities, some white priests outside the school were disturbed by the thought of white men (even in priestly garb) beating black youths. But Father O'Rourke and the other priests felt no guilt—the Josephite Order had been founded in the 19th century to serve blacks—and

viewed the problem in purely pragmatic terms. Their options were to allow disruptive students to undo their work with others, to save the school by expelling such students, or to attempt to save both the students and the school by an occasional paddling. They elected to try the last. Despite the misgivings of some outside priests, the black parents backed the teachers completely, and the system worked. It has remained a feature of St. Augustine to the present—strongly believed in, but infrequently used. The student/teacher relations in St. Augustine are more relaxed and warm than in most public schools, where corporal punishment is usually forbidden by law.

The school was neither wedded to tradition nor seeking to be in the vanguard of "innovation." It did whatever worked educationally, and abandoned what did not. The wide range of student preparation led to ability-grouping, and to the jettisoning of the traditional English courses for the least prepared students in favor of an emphasis on reading, at virtually any cost. *Time* magazine was found to be an effective vocabulary tool for many students, and hundreds of St. Augustine students subscribed, at the urging of their teachers. A special summer course featured speed reading, with assignments of a novel per week, including reports.

The teachers' inexperience and lack of familiarity with educational fashions paid off handsomely. The first Southern Negro student to win a National Merit Scholarship came from St. Augustine. So did the first Presidential Scholar of any race from the state of Louisiana in 1964, and 10 years later, St. Augustine had produced 20 per cent of all the Presidential Scholars in the history of the state. In the National Achievement Scholarship program for black students, St. Augustine has produced more finalists and semi-finalists than any other school in the nation. In 1964—before the big college drive to enroll black students—St. Augustine's students won more than \$100,000 in college scholarship money. This is all the more remarkable since the total enrollment is less than 700.

The pattern of I.Q. scores over time at St. Augustine shows a generally upward movement, beginning at a level very similar to the average for black students and reaching a level at or above that for the United States population as a whole. In its early years, St. Augustine had mean I.Q.'s as low as 86; but during the period from 1964 through 1972, I.Q.'s were just over 100 for every year except one.

The reasons for the rising I.Q.'s at St. Augustine cannot be easily determined. Father O'Rourke is reluctant to claim credit for the

school itself. But in recalling his years as principal, he cited a number of instances where students with potential, but without cultural development, had improved after extra attention—improved not only on achievement tests, but also on I.Q. tests, “though that’s not supposed to happen.” Test scores were never used as a rigid admissions cutoff at St. Augustine. Our sample includes individual I.Q.’s in the 60’s, as well as many others more than twice as high.

Father O’Rourke was succeeded as principal in 1960 by Father Robert H. Grant, one of the other young priests teaching at St. Augustine. Where Father O’Rourke had been universally liked, Father Grant tended to have both enthusiasts and detractors. Under Father Grant’s administration, a heavy emphasis on academic achievement and tighter discipline brought Merit and Presidential scholars, school-wide I.Q.’s averaging over 100—and murmurs of discontent in the community. The discontented usually were *not* parents of students at St. Augustine. The rise of racial militancy raised questions about a white principal of a black school and brought demands for a “black” orientation of the curriculum. In retrospect, Father Grant describes his administration as “benignly autocratic” and himself as “blunt.” “We didn’t spend much time hassling, debating, or dialoguing.” The teachers and principal had their meetings, but once an agreement had been reached, they did not “waste time” with “parent power” or “student rights,” but relied instead on parental trust and on student achievement as a vindication of that trust. He met the demands for “black studies” by establishing an elective course on the subject—meeting at a time that was otherwise available as a study period. Only six students enrolled, out of more than 600 students in the school.

Although Father Grant fought a legal battle to integrate Louisiana’s high school athletics, and was sympathetic to the civil rights movement in general, he was also opposed to the introduction of “extraneous elements, issues, and concerns” into the school itself. Keenly aware of both the students’ cultural disadvantages and the need to overcome them, he felt that “we absolutely could not do the two things well,” though both were important. It was a matter of time and priorities: “Don’t consume my time with extraneous issues and then expect me to have enough time left over to dedicate myself to a strong academic program where I will turn out strong, intelligent, competent kids.”

In 1969, Father Grant accepted a post in Switzerland and was replaced by a black lay principal—just what the doctor ordered politically, but apparently not administratively or educationally. He

was replaced after a few years. The current principal, Leo A. Johnson, is also a black layman and, in addition, the first alumnus of St. Augustine to head the school. His term began in 1974, and it is too early to assess his impact on the school.

Teaching methods at St. Augustine are traditional, and both its academic and behavioral standards are strict. Students must wear "a dress shirt with a collar," and the shirttail "must be worn inside the trousers at all times." The general atmosphere at St. Augustine is relaxed, but serious. Its halls are quiet and its students are attentive and engrossed in what they are doing, as are the teachers. Yet it is not a wholly bookish place. Its athletic teams have won many local championships in football, basketball, and baseball. At lunch time, the students were as noisy as any other high school students, and the boys in the lunch room were visibly appreciative of a shapely young woman who was part of our research team. One of the real accomplishments of St. Augustine has been to give education a masculine image so that black youths need not consider intellectual activity "sissy."

The achievements of St. Augustine cannot be explained by the usual phrase of dismissal, "middle-class." Although it is a private school, its modest tuition (\$645 per year) does not require affluence, and about 15 per cent of the students pay no tuition at all, while others pay reduced tuition because of their parents' low income. The school runs a chronic deficit, despite the low pay scale for those teachers who are clergy. Despite the color/caste history of New Orleans, the students at St. Augustine are physically indistinguishable from the students at any other black high school. Their demeanor and their work are *very* different, but their skin color is the same. Our statistical tabulation of parents' occupations covers only the years from 1951 through 1957, but in each year during that span more than half of the known parental occupations were in the "unskilled and semi-skilled" category, and the parents with professional or white-collar jobs added up to less than one tenth as many. While the students are seldom from the lowest poverty level, there is only occasionally the son of a doctor. Many come from families where the father is a bricklayer, carpenter, or other artisan, and has only a modest educational background. They are not middle-class in income, career security, culture, or lifestyle. Many are ambitious for their children and send them to school with attitudes that allow the education to "take." But such attitudes are not a monopoly of the middle class, despite sociological stereotyping. If such attitudes were in fact a monopoly of the

middle class, neither blacks nor other ethnic minorities could ever have risen.

New Orleans: Xavier Prep

Xavier Prep is an all-girl Catholic school run by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. It was founded in 1915, and was coeducational until 1970. It had 18 graduating seniors in 1918, and the enrollment increased to about 500 in 1940. It has about 350 students today, after the male students were phased out in the 1960's. Even when it was coeducational, it had more female than male students. One of the reasons for the difficulty of maintaining a masculine image for education among black youths is that, throughout the country and down through the years, Negro girls have outperformed Negro boys by a wide margin on grades, tests, and virtually every measure of intellectual ability. Studies of high I.Q. black students have consistently found the girls outnumbering the boys, by from two-to-one to more than five-to-one.

Over 90 per cent of the graduates of Xavier Prep go on to college. Until the 1960's, almost all went to Xavier University in New Orleans, run by the same order of nuns. Today about 60 per cent of the graduates go to either Xavier University, Loyola, or Tulane—all in New Orleans—even though their academic preparation would make them eligible for many other colleges and universities in other parts of the country.

I.Q. scores and other test scores vary considerably among Xavier students, but the average score of the school as a whole has fluctuated around the national norm—which is to say, higher than for Southerners of either race, higher than for black students nationally, and considerably higher than for black Southern children from the modest socioeconomic backgrounds of Xavier students. The mean I.Q. of the school as a whole ranged from 96 to 108 during the 1960's, and has been at or above 100 for each year surveyed during the 1970's.

In the earliest years of Xavier Prep, many of the students were from Creole backgrounds. But today the colors and conditions of the students represent a cross section of black America. Over the years, about 40 to 50 per cent of the students have come from low-income families, many entering with serious educational deficiencies, requiring remedial work. More than 60 per cent of its students are eligible for the free lunch program. While Xavier is a private school, its tuition is only \$35 a month. Our statistical

tabulation of parental occupation shows that from one half to four fifths of the parents' occupations have been in the "unskilled or semi-skilled" category, in the period from 1949 to 1972 for which we have data. Parents in professional or white-collar occupations put together added up to only seven per cent of the total during that same span. The principal, Sister Anne Louise Bechtold, recalls "one dentist" this year and "one lawyer last year" among the parents, but no engineers or college professors, and a small percentage of public school teachers—and otherwise parents of very modest socioeconomic backgrounds, with some of the mothers being domestics or store clerks and the fathers in similar occupations.

Unlike middle-class parents, the parents of Xavier students tend to be very cautious about their input into the school—even when invited and encouraged to participate. They seek discipline and an emphasis on basic education, and seem particularly pleased when their children's teachers are nuns. The caution of the parents is also a factor in the narrow range of colleges which most Xavier graduates attend. Ivy League and other Northern colleges attempt to recruit Xavier graduates, but the parents are reluctant to have their daughters exposed to strange influences in faraway colleges. In some cases, the teachers or counsellors fight a losing battle to get a promising student to accept an offer from a top-level college or university. This is not all the result of the limited cultural horizons of the parents. Economic pressures make it difficult for many of the parents to finance the travel involved, much less the living expenses, even if the student has a full scholarship.

Classes at Xavier Prep in the past tended to be large (35-40 students), but since boys were phased out in the mid-1960's, classes have been reduced to about 25 to 30 students. These students are "tracked" by academic ability. The less prepared students are given intensive and imaginative remedial work. Unlike St. Augustine, Xavier Prep has neither corporal punishment nor an emphasis on athletics. But the general atmosphere—described by one nun as "reserved but informal"—is very similar. Nuns and lay teachers are about equally represented on its faculty, and its principal is a nun. It is a quiet, low-key place where the changing of classes produces swarms of black teenagers in the halls, but little noise. The classes in session have students and teachers absorbed in mutual endeavor, but with a certain relaxed geniality. Discussions with Xavier teachers indicate that they put much thought and work, on their own time, into the preparation of their classes. Although subject to the guidance of superiors both inside and outside the school, the

teachers seem to have more scope for personal initiative than do public school teachers. Among alumni of the school, their teachers' personal interest in them is a factor often cited as having given them the inspiration and self-confidence that came before the educational achievements themselves.

Brooklyn: P.S. 91

Perhaps the most remarkable of all the schools in this study is P.S. 91, an elementary school in a rundown neighborhood of Brooklyn. Here, where over half the students are eligible for the free lunch program and a significant proportion are on welfare, *every grade approximates or (usually) exceeds the national norms* in reading comprehension. A tour of the ancient school building is even more surprising than these statistics. Here, in class after class, the students—overwhelmingly ghetto youngsters—work quietly, intently, and pleasantly under the direction of obviously intelligent and interested teachers and teacher aides who represent a wide range of ages, races, and personal styles. The sheer silence of the school was eerie to one who had attended elementary school in central Harlem and had recently researched similar schools elsewhere.

In class after class, discussion periods brought lively exchanges between teachers and pupils—the children speaking in complete sentences, grammatically and directly to the point, and returning to the subject if the teacher's response was not clear or satisfactory to them. To see this happening with children identical in appearance and dress to those who are dull, withdrawn, or hostile in untold other ghetto schools can only be described as an emotional experience. After leaving one classroom where a lively discussion was still in progress, the principal said matter-of-factly, "That was our slow learners' class. They are doing all right, but I think there is need for improvement."

That was the remarkable attitude of a remarkable man. Martin Shor, the principal, is white and was principal of the school when the school was white. As the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn changed its racial composition and the socioeconomic level fell, the school population reflected these changes. Now there are only a few white or oriental children in P.S. 91. But unlike other schools whose academic standards have fallen along with the socioeconomic level of their neighborhoods, P.S. 91 has had a *rising* proportion of its students scoring above the national norms in reading. In 1971, just over 49 per cent of its students exceeded the national

norms, in 1972 it was 51 per cent, in 1973 it was 54 per cent, and in 1974 it was 57 per cent. To put these numbers in perspective, *none* of the 12 other schools in its district had even 40 per cent of their students above the national norms, even though some of these other schools are in higher-socioeconomic-status neighborhoods. The highest percentage in the whole borough of Brooklyn—with more than 600 elementary schools—is 60 per cent above the national norms.

The handicaps under which P.S. 91 operates include a very high turnover rate, characteristic of ghetto schools. There was a 34 per cent turnover in just three months. This means that the school loses many of the good students it has prepared in the early grades and receives from other ghetto schools badly prepared youngsters whom it must reeducate in later grades. This is apparently a factor in the pattern of scores whereby the lower grades at P.S. 91 exceed the national norms by wider margins than the higher grades (see the table below). However, it should be noted that other black schools in other cities also tend to score relatively higher in their earlier grades—sometimes even exceeding the national norms in the early grades, in schools far below the national norms overall. How much of the later disastrous decline in scores in ghetto schools is the result of high turnover and how much is the result of the negative effects of the school itself, or the development of negative attitudes by the students toward the school (or life), is a subject which has scarcely been explored. Indeed, the phenomenon itself has hardly been recognized. It is well known that black children tend to fall progressively further behind as they go through school systems, but just how well they do in the first or second grades—even in school systems with dreadful overall results, such as in Chicago or Philadelphia—is a largely unrecognized phenomena.

Martin Shor puts heavy emphasis on teaching the P.S. 91 pupils to read well in the first grade. Indeed, half of the P.S. 91 children can read when they have finished kindergarten. While the school

Reading Scores, P.S. 91, Brooklyn¹

GRADE	NATIONAL NORMS	P.S. 91 MEDIAN
2	2.7	3.5
3	3.7	4.1
4	4.7	4.5
5	5.7	6.3
6	6.7	6.7

¹ Source: Compilation from District 17, Brooklyn.

bears the imprint of his own special methods and approach, Shor argues that none of these methods would work unless the students first knew how to read. A disproportionate amount of the school's money and teaching talent goes into preparing the first-graders to read, write, and express themselves orally.

The higher grades use a variety of self-teaching materials, including programmed books, teaching machines, and tape recorders. Many of these materials are *a year or more ahead* of the "age" or "grade" level of the students using them. Students are separated into small groups by ability within each class as well as between classes, and each group has its own assignment. "This may look like an 'open' classroom," Shor said. "But it's not. Every group is working on its own *assigned* task." When asked if this "tracking" system did not originally lead to certain racial imbalances in classes within the school, Shor pointed out that initially disadvantaged students advanced enough to produce more racial balance eventually.

"But if other schools followed your system," I asked, "wouldn't that mean that, in the interim, a multi-racial school would have the appearance of internal segregation, which would lead to a lot of political flack?" "Then you just take the flack," he said. He had taken flack during the period of racial transition at P.S. 91, but the educational results silenced critics and gained parental support. How many other white principals in a ghetto neighborhood have that kind of courage is another question. A study of unusually successful ghetto schools by the Office of Educational Personnel Review in New York concluded that "the quality and attitude of the administrator seemed to be the only real difference" between these schools and less successful ones. A few hours with Martin Shor reinforce that conclusion. He is a quietly confident, forceful man, with an incisive mind, much experience and resourcefulness, and the implicit faith that the job *can* be done. His talk is free of the educational clichés and public relations smoothness normally associated with school administrators. He comes to the ghetto to do a job, does it well, and then goes home elsewhere—contrary to the emotional cries about the need for indigenous community leadership in the school.

P.S. 91 does not teach "black English" or black studies, though its many books and other materials do include a few items of special interest to black children. The school tries to *expand* the students' cultural horizons: Several hundred of these elementary school pupils study foreign languages. P.S. 91 students also read excerpts from translations of the classics of world literature, such as Cer-

vantes or Aesop. They are constantly exposed to material that allows their minds to see beyond the drab school building, the decaying tenements, and the area that caused a friend to tell me, "You sure are brave to park a car in *that* neighborhood." The usual "middle-class" label used to dismiss black educational achievements is only a bad joke when applied to P.S. 91.

Washington, D.C.: Dunbar High School

The oldest and most illustrious of the black elite schools was Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., during the period from 1870 to 1955. Over that 85-year span, most of its graduates went to college—rare for whites or blacks, then—and many went on to outstanding academic achievements and distinguished careers. Back at the turn of the century, Dunbar was sending students to Harvard, and in the period 1918-1923, Dunbar graduates earned 15 degrees from Ivy League colleges, and 10 degrees from Amherst, Williams, and Wesleyan. During World War II, Dunbar alumni in the Army included "nearly a score of Majors, nine Colonels and Lieutenant Colonels, and a Brigadier General"—a substantial percentage of all high-ranking black officers at that time.

Dunbar was the first black public high school in the United States. Its unique position allowed it to select some of the best of the educated blacks in the country for its teachers and principals. Of its first nine principals, seven had degrees from either Harvard, Oberlin, Dartmouth, or Amherst. Of the remaining two, one was educated in Glasgow and London, and the other was a Phi Beta Kappa from Western Reserve. The principals included the first black woman in the United States to receive a college degree (from Oberlin, 1862) and the first black man to graduate from Harvard (in 1870). Clearly they were remarkable people even to attempt what they did, when they did.

So too was the man who spearheaded the drive that led to the founding of the school which ultimately became Dunbar High School (after several changes of name and location). William Syphax was a "free person of color," born in 1826 and active in civic affairs and civil rights issues, "fearing no man regardless of position or color." As a trustee of the Negro schools in Washington, Syphax preferred to hire black teachers, but only when their qualifications were equal to those of white teachers—for the trustees "deem it a violation of our official oath to employ inferior teachers when superior teachers can be had for the same money." He

addressed demands not only to whites in power, but also to his own people, exhorting them to send their children to school with discipline, respect, and a willingness to work hard. These became hallmarks of Dunbar High School, as did the academic success that flowed from them. As early as 1899, Dunbar scored higher in city-wide tests than any of the white high schools in the District of Columbia. Down through the years its attendance records were generally better than those of the white high schools, and its rate of tardiness was lower. Dunbar meant business.

The teachers at Dunbar usually held degrees in liberal arts from top institutions, not education degrees from teachers colleges. The scarcity of alternative occupations for educated Negroes allowed Dunbar to pick the cream of the crop. As late as the 1920's, its staff included individuals with Ph.D.'s from leading universities, including the distinguished historian Carter G. Woodson. The teachers were as dedicated and demanding as they were qualified. Extra-curricular tutoring, securing scholarships for graduating seniors, getting parents of promising students to keep them in school despite desperate family finances—all these were part of the voluntary work load of Dunbar teachers and principals. In a city that remained racially segregated into the 1950's, there were also constant efforts to bring cultural attractions to the school that were unavailable to black youngsters in theaters, concert halls, or other cultural and entertainment centers. While individual pride and racial awareness were part of the atmosphere at Dunbar High School, cultural expansion was the educational goal. Latin was taught throughout the period from 1870 to 1955, and in the early decades, Greek was taught as well. In the 1940's, Dunbar fought a losing battle with the superintendent of schools to have calculus added.

Throughout the 85-year period of its academic ascendancy, Dunbar never had adequate financial support. At its founding it was allowed to draw only on taxes collected in the black community. While this arrangement eventually gave way to drawing on the general taxes of the city, so too did the separate administration of Negro schools by black trustees give way to city-wide administration by an all-white board of education, which never provided equal support. Large classes were the norm from the 1870's, when there were more than 40 students per teacher, to the 1950's, when Dunbar's student/teacher ratio exceeded that of any white high school in Washington. The school was in operation more than 40 years before it had a lunch room, which then was so small that many children had to eat lunch out on the street. Blackboards were

"cracked with confusing lines resembling a map." It was 1950 before the school had a public address system.

The social origins of Dunbar students were diverse. For three decades, Dunbar was the only black high school in Washington, D.C., and for three more decades it was the only black academic high school in the city, so it drew on a broad cross section of students. As late as 1948, one third of all black high school students in Washington were enrolled in Dunbar. Nevertheless, the "middle-class" label has been stuck on Dunbar, and no amount of facts dispels it. According to a *Washington Post* reporter, the one word "Dunbar" will divide any room of middle-aged black Washingtonians into "outraged warring factions." Some are fiercely loyal to Dunbar as a monumental educational achievement, while others see it as snobbish elitism for middle-class mulattoes who either excluded poor blacks from the school or ostracized them if they attended. A look through old yearbook photographs will disprove the myth of mulatto predominance, and our statistical tabulation of parental occupations from 1938 through 1955 shows 38 per cent of known parental occupations to have been "unskilled and semi-skilled" (including many maids), while "white-collar" and "professional" occupations together added up to only 17 per cent.

Unquestionably, almost all middle-class Negroes in Washington sent their children to Dunbar during the period from 1870 to 1955, and for historical reasons, middle-class Negroes tended to be lighter in color—but that is very different from saying that most Dunbar students were either middle class or mulattoes. Former Dunbar Principal Charles Lofton calls it all "an old wives' tale." "If we took only the children of doctors and lawyers," he asked, "how could we have had 1400 black students at one time?" Yet the persistence and power of the myth suggests something of the depth of the hurt felt by those who either did not go to Dunbar because of fear of social rejection or did go and did not feel accepted. To this day, one Dunbar alumna has a policy at social gatherings in Washington of never mentioning where she went to high school.

Dunbar alumni claim that the school was at its academic peak in the 1920's or earlier—in particular that the "M Street School," which was the name prior to 1917, was superior to "Dunbar," which was the name attached to the building constructed that year. There is some inconclusive evidence—graduation years of distinguished alumni, numbers of graduates attending top colleges, etc.—supporting this view, but no standard tests were given in both eras that would permit a direct comparison. The earliest I.Q. records

available are for 1938, so that our data cover only its supposedly declining years. Nonetheless, for this 18-year period, the average I.Q. in the school was below 100 for only one year (when it was 99) and was as high as 111 (in 1939).

There is general agreement that Dunbar declined precipitously and catastrophically after the school reorganization of 1955 made it a neighborhood school for the first time in its history. Its neighborhood was one of the worst in the city, and as its new students entered, advanced elective courses gave way to remedial math and English, and its quiet building now became the scene of "discipline problems." The past excellence of the school had caused many teachers to stay on past the retirement age, and now many of them began to retire at once. By the 1960's a newspaper story on the school was titled "Black Elite Institution Now Typical Slum Facility." It remains a typical slum school today—its past recalled only in the heat of a bitter controversy over the tearing down of the old building standing alongside a modern school bearing the same name. One of several city councilmen who favored demolition said that Dunbar "represents a symbol of elitism among blacks that should never appear again." But a Dunbar alumnus wondered if the real problem was that the new school fears the "silent competition" of the old building and the achievement it represents.

Educational "law and order"

Contrary to current fashions, it has not been necessary (or usual) to have a special method of teaching to "reach" black children in order to have high-quality education. Teaching methods used in the schools studied here have varied enormously from school to school, and even in particular schools the variation from teacher to teacher has been so great as to defy general characterization. Everything from religious principles to corporal punishment has been used to maintain order. The buildings have ranged from the most dilapidated wrecks to a sparkling plate-glass palace. The teachers and principals have been black and white, religious and secular, authoritarian and gentle, community leaders and visitors from another social world. Some have had a warm "human touch" and others would have failed Public Relations I. Their only common denominators have been dedication to education, commitment to the children, and faith in what it was possible to achieve. The institutional common denominators of these schools are a larger and more complex question.

In general, test scores have been significantly higher at these schools than at black schools in general, and have been highest at the most elite and oldest—Dunbar High School in Washington, in its academic heyday. Yet their I.Q. scores have not been as high as those at white high schools of comparable achievement, and all of the schools studied have included students well below national test score norms. In short, test scores are not “irrelevant” for black achievement, but neither are they the be-all and end-all. One of the tragedies in the wake of the Jensen controversy is that many schools and school systems avoid giving I.Q. tests for fear of political repercussions, when in fact much useful information can be obtained from this imperfect instrument, once its limitations are understood. Even where I.Q. tests are used, the results are often handled in a politicized way. For example, the Austin (Texas) public school system refused to release data on a school being considered for inclusion in this study because of “legal” reasons—but only after a lengthy cross-examination on my personal beliefs about various issues involved in the I.Q. controversy. Sometimes the data are suppressed for more directly institutional political reasons—as in the case of a large metropolitan black school on the West Coast whose outstanding performance is kept quiet for fear of citizen demands to know why the other black schools in the same city cannot produce similar results.

Perhaps the most basic characteristic of all these schools could be called “law and order,” if these had not become politically dirty words. Each of these schools currently maintaining high standards was a very quiet and orderly school, whether located in a middle-class suburb of Atlanta or in the heart of a deteriorating ghetto in Brooklyn. Schools formerly of high quality were repeatedly described by alumni, teachers, and others as places where “discipline problems” were virtually unheard-of. “Respect” was the word most used by those interviewed to describe the attitudes of students and parents toward these schools. “The teacher was *always* right” was a phrase that was used again and again to describe the attitude of the black parents of a generation or more ago. Most Negro students of that era would not have dreamed of complaining to their parents after being punished by a teacher, for that would have been likely to bring on a second—and worse—punishment at home. Even today, in those few instances where schools have the confidence of black parents, a wise student maintains a discreet silence at home about his difficulties with teachers, and hopes that the teachers do the same. The black culture is not a permissive cul-

ture. But in more and more cases, "student rights" activists among adults—particularly adults with an eye to political exposure—create a more contentious environment in which it is the teacher or the principal who maintains a discreet silence for fear of legal or physical retaliation. The sheer exhaustion of going through "due process" for every disruptive student who needs to be suspended is enough to discourage decisive action by many school officials.

The destruction of high-quality black schools has been associated with a breakdown in the basic framework of law and order. Nor did it require mass violence to destroy these or other black schools. Again and again those interviewed who were working in the field of education pointed out that only a fraction—perhaps no more than one tenth of the students—need to be hard-core troublemakers in order for good education to become impossible. Another way of looking at this is that only a small amount of initial selectivity (including student self-selection) or subsequent ability to suspend or expel is necessary to free a school of a major obstacle to education. At one time this small amount of selectivity was provided automatically for black (and other) high schools, because most uninterested students did not go on to high school. Those whose educational performances were substandard in the lower grades were left back often enough to reach the age to leave school before reaching high school. Moreover, that legal age was lower then; and, in addition, those utterly uninterested in school were unlikely to be zealously pursued by attendance officers in the era before the "dropout" problem became an emotionally important political issue.

Formal selectivity, in terms of entrance examination cutoff scores, was the exception rather than the rule for the schools studied here. Most of these were public schools serving all students in a given area; and for some period of their history, that area has included all black children in the city, in the cases of Dunbar, Douglass, and Booker T. Washington High Schools. The private schools—St. Augustine, Xavier, and St. Paul—have entrance examinations, but these do not automatically admit or exclude, and the wide range of student test scores in these schools indicates that such scores are far from decisive in admissions. In short, no stringent "elitism" is necessary to achieve high-quality education. It is only necessary to select, or have students self-select, in such a way as to exclude the tiny fraction who are troublemakers.

At one time, it was a relatively simple matter to suspend, expel, or transfer a disruptive student to some "special" class or "dumping ground" vocational school, allowing the rest of the edu-

cational system to proceed undisturbed. Now this has become more difficult with the growth of "student rights" and "parent power"—and, more generally, with an agonizing preoccupation with the question of what can be done for the disruptive student to "solve" his "problem." This mass projection of the academic paradigm of problem-solving to the whole society is part of the general spirit of the times, but it overlooks the vital question whether there is, in fact, a solution—whether we have it within our grasp today, and whether we shall allow the "problem" to take its fullest destructive toll before such indefinite time as we have it "solved." Recent campaigns to "get the drunk driver off the road" suggest that there are cases where the primary concern is to protect society, and where whatever remedies can be offered the individual are secondary. The enormous toll of a few destructive students on black education is one of the tragic untold stories of our time—perhaps because there is no political gain to be made by telling it, and much political capital to reap from championing "student rights."

Recovering the past

While order and respect have been universal characteristics of the schools studied here, other ingredients have also been necessary to create academic excellence. Chief among these have been the character and ability of the principals. Some of these principals have been of heroic dimensions—fighters for civil rights at a time when that was a dangerous role—and others have been simply dedicated educators. The number of these principals who have trained at top colleges and universities in the country suggests that investments made in promising Negro youths more than half a century ago have paid off large and continuing dividends.

Ability grouping has been a prominent feature of most of these schools during their periods of academic excellence—contrary to the "democratic" trends in contemporary education. For many reasons going back into history, there are very wide ranges of educational preparation and orientation among black children, and accommodating them all in one standard curriculum may often be impractical. Among Dunbar students in the period from 1938 to 1955, it was not uncommon to find individuals with I.Q.'s in the 80's and individuals with I.Q.'s in the 140's in the same grade. In P.S. 91 today, the ability-grouping principle includes not only several different classes in the same grade but also several different ability groupings within each class—all told, perhaps two dozen ability lev-

els in a single grade. This may not sound plausible as an educational policy, but it works—and it works in an unpromising social setting where many more popular ideas fail to show any results.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of contemporary education is the extent to which the very process of testing ideas and procedures by their actual *results* has been superseded by a process of testing them by their consonance with existing *preconceptions* about education and society. Father Grant, even after his remarkable successes as principal of St. Augustine, found no receptivity at the Ford Foundation either to his appeals for money for the school or to his ideas about education. He was out of step with the rhetoric of his time and did not use the “innovative” methods that were preconceived to be necessary or beneficial to black students. Xavier Prep, even after more than half a century of demonstrable results, is still looking for a modest sum of money to improve its library, but libraries are not “exciting” or “imaginative”—as “black English” or “black studies” are.

The social settings of the schools studied here are also significant. Every one of them was an urban school. This is remarkable because during the academic heyday of most of these schools most American Negroes lived in rural and small-town settings. This suggests that the rise of such prominent blacks as those who came from these schools—which is to say, most of the top black pioneers in the history of this country—seems a matter less of innate ability and more of special social settings in which individual ability could develop; and that the settings from which such black leadership arose were quite different from the social settings in which the mass of the black population lived. The second point needs emphasis only because of the recent mystique surrounding “grass roots” origins and/or the faithful reflection of “grass roots” attitudes by leaders. Much of this is nothing more than brazen presumption and reckless semantics: No one ever applies labels like “middle-class” to Angela Davis or LeRoi Jones (or others of their persuasion), though that is in fact their origin, while those with a more moderate philosophy are often condemned as “middle-class”—no matter that they may actually have come from desperate poverty, and no matter how many polls show that their opinions are shared by the masses of blacks.

The particular cities in which the high-quality black schools arose were distinctive as centers of concentration for the “free persons of color” in the antebellum era. Except in the case of Dunbar High School in Washington, there was no unbroken historical line trace-

able back to the free Negroes of the early 19th century, but it seems more than coincidence that these schools took root in places where there had been schools for black children (usually private schools) 50 or 100 years earlier. That is, an old black community with a demand for good education existed even before good schools became an institutional reality. It is not that the bulk of the Negroes in these cities necessarily wanted quality education, but that there was an important nucleus that understood what was needed, and that the others recognized and respected good education when it appeared.

Apparently the great bulk of black children who benefited from these schools were *not* descendants of "free persons of color" or of middle-class Negroes in general. But the knowledge, experience, and values of the more fortunate segment of the race became their heritage. While the black educated classes were not angels—they could be as snobbish and insufferable as any other privileged group—they were a vital source of knowledge, discipline, and competence. They opened a window on a wider world of human history and culture. They did not glorify provincialism or tribalism, in the manner of some of today's black middle-class radicals who attempt to expiate their own past by being "blacker-than-thou." Those white officials who have successfully run high-quality black schools have, without exception, been men and women who were neither impressed nor intimidated by the militant vogues of the 1960's.

Whatever is the objective importance of social history in any final assessment of black education, that history must be dealt with—if only to counter the *fictitious* history that has become part of current stereotypes. Messianic movements of whatever place or time tend to denigrate the past as a means of making themselves unique and their vision glorious. Recent black messianic movements, and white messianic movements speaking in the name of blacks, have been no exception. The picture that emerges from these visions is of an inert, fearful, and unconcerned black leadership in the past—leaders only recently superseded by bold men of vision, like themselves. This is a libel on the men and women who faced up to far more serious dangers than our generation will ever confront, who took the children of slaves and made them educated men and women, and who put in the long hours of hard work required to turn a despised mass into a cohesive community. In many ways, those communities had far more cohesion, stability, mutual respect, and plain humanity than the ghettos of today.

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